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The Meaning of Place, or Rather, Being Out of Place

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Panel: Sense of Place

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The Meaning of Place, or Rather, Being Out of Place

The Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska once said, “The first sentence is always the hardest to muster, and that is now behind me.” But the trepidation in me over this topic persists, even after mustering the first words. I still could not fathom what the topic entailed, nor could I understand why I chose it in the first place. Well, perhaps, with hindsight, I could attribute it to the fact that I have been “out of place” myself. It follows that when one is deprived of the place he loves and has located his life in, his linguistic power, among other things, often fails him. I implore you then, ladies and gentlemen, to forgive my dawdling and rambling thoughts. Perhaps because I come from a place where life proceeds with dullness and confusion, where I have the “luxury” of not having to depend on it as others have in other parts of the world, place has not featured so prominently in my writing, nor has it been something I fret about all the time. This does not mean it is not important to a writer like me who, by virtue of where I come from, has necessarily to be political, and I would dare say writing, even thinking about place, is indubitably a political act.

Place, or rather, the idea of it, and the way in which it regulates and impacts our memories, suddenly becomes all too significant when we stop to ponder it. Its importance resides in the fact that our sense of who we are or what could be, the whole matrix of identity, is in so many ways mediated and validated by our sense of place.

I, like many people, have memories, and as such have certain romantic and emotional attachments and connections to certain places. My home, my city, my country for example, have undoubtedly moulded my personality and essentially made me who I am and who I could yet become. So the argument could be made as swiftly as possible that my individual identity depends upon the process of recapturing and making sense of all the places in which my life so far has taken place.

I still remember with some level of nostalgia and even a streak of pride the house I grew up in, the school I attended, the playground, the alleyways and winding pot-holed roads I had to take while running errands for my granny of blessed memory. Over the years I have invested a lot of emotion and attachments to those disparate places--most importantly because they offered me a sense of the familiar--and I have an illusion of safety and happiness in their wild, unpredictable expanse. One could therefore say that it is the various experiences that happened over the years in those places that make them memorable and explain the attachment. At the same time our attachment to places could also be explained by the influence of certain experiences on our memories and individual identities. For writers especially, this explanation should be emphasised.

When we dip into our memories and replay the reel of our lives in whatever mood we deem fit, often the first thing we do—indeed, the thing that makes such a dip possible—is to consider the place. Experience, as it were, has to happen in a particular place, as no event happens in a vacuum. That is why most often when we remember an event or an experience, the first thing that comes to the fore is the place where the experience or event happened. All of this, confusing as it may sound, leads me to believe that it is our experience of a place—whether sad, melancholic or pleasant—that gives it its meaning. A place, the physical space is inevitably changed from a mere physicality into something much more lasting in the working of our memory because we want to give it meaning. By investing a particular meaning in a place, we are giving ourselves reasons to remember it.

As a poet living in an urban jungle, where chaos and disorder seem perfectly normal, where noise and rancour are what everybody has to live with, and where the rhythm of life seems to swing with a tide that would seem outright mad and maddening in other places, I take the strain of being in two places, one real and physical, and the other necessarily imagined and textual. To cling to the latter place is to belong to a realm that is riven by the notion of belonging to other places as well, places that we could only encounter in the continuum of the literary text.

As I reacquainted myself with the sense of place in my poetry, I found out I wanted to reduce everything I cherish about my city, Kano, into a character: one who is other than myself of course, a character who could be like someone else, who couldn't be me. Sense of place is not just used as shorthand for, say, one's feeling for a place and the things that make it tick; it is not just the memories, views, the sounds, the flora and fauna or the taste but also the possibility of achieving the impossible, the improbable. For it is only in an imaginary textual place that I could escape the sickening cultural conservatism of where I grew up.

I would like to end with the bon mot that places, like some magical novels laying in waiting for the most magical of readers, are very patient; always waiting for us to interpret them, becoming, albeit all-too figuratively, patient of interpretation.